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Gifts and Burdens: Elaborating Pihlström's Antitheodicy

Risto Saarinen

In his book *Kantian Antitheodicy: Philosophical and Literary Varieties* (co-authored with Sari Kivistö), Sami Pihlström argues that antitheodicy is the only way to recognize appropriately the other's suffering. Referring to Emanuel Levinas and many others, Pihlström claims that there are sincere experiences of meaningless suffering. When others attempt to explain away or justify such suffering with the help of utilitarian considerations or externally imposed meanings, they fail to recognize the sincerity of the person who experiences meaningless suffering (Kivistö & Pihlström 2016, 93-96, 263-264).

For Pihlström, such attempts of theodicy are not merely immoral. In addition, they fail to grasp the necessary conditions for the possibility of the moral point of view. To show this, Pihlström lays out a Kantian "transcendental form of antitheodicism". According to this view, a truly moral point of view means that one needs to recognize adequately others' experiences of suffering. As theodicies seek to justify or explain away meaningless suffering, they cannot recognize adequately sincere experiences of meaningless suffering. Therefore, theodicies prevent us from adopting a moral point of view. (2016, 263-264)

Meaningless Suffering

Pihlström further claims that one can recognize other people's sincere experiences of meaningless suffering when no theodicy is attempted. Therefore, theodicies are to be rejected for transcendental reasons, as they prevent our understanding of the necessary conditions of a moral point of view. (2016, 263-264).

When a person sincerely experiences "meaningless suffering", what kind of suffering does he or she experience? Pihlström and Kivistö offer a variety of characterizations which manifest at least two clusters of meaninglessness. In the first cluster, such suffering offers no "compensation" or "future benefits" (2016, 264). There is a permanent "disproportion" between suffering and theodictist justification. No "purifying fire of suffering" occurs (2016, 91-92). No harmony in the world of things can be assumed and all evidentialist accounts to balance suffering with other benefits remain inadequate (2016, 113, 156). Meaningless suffering cannot be instrumental for the sake of some greater good (2016, 53-54).

In another book written in Finnish, Pihlström (2018, 185-190) compares such suffering with the Lake Inari which, according to a Finnish song, is so deep that it cannot be measured. Pihlström concludes that suffering is in this way "immeasurable". It cannot be explained, and it is not big or small, but immeasurable like the Lake Inari. In another paper on the so-called argument from evil, Pihlström (2017) concludes that this argument understands evil and suffering as pieces of empirical evidence against theism. Such understanding fails to capture the actual depth of living with evil and suffering. The actual depth of immeasurable suffering can thus falsify both theodicy and the evidentialist argument from evil.

Let us summarize this first cluster of characterizations with the phrase that meaningless suffering is *immeasurable*. Such immeasurability covers and refutes all ideas of compensation, proportion and instrumental utility.

The second cluster includes characterizations in which suffering escapes fixed meanings. Suffering "everywhere and always resists being given a meaning or context". "The I with which the phenomenology of suffering must begin is an I for whom the other's suffering is

unthinkable and unjustifiable”, Pihlström and Kivistö (2016, 93-94) write, relying on Emanuel Levinas. To recognize the suffering of others, “one should take seriously the incomprehensibility of the human life”. For such reasons, authors like Beckett and Kafka can provide guidance. They manifest such “ethical openness” which is necessary to acknowledge the meaninglessness of suffering. (2016, 264-265). Instead of order, optimism and progress, antitheodists live in a world “where disasters of natural and moral kinds can strike without rhyme and reason” (2016, 143).

Let us summarize this second cluster with the phrase that meaningless suffering is semantically *elusive*. This concept manifests the core idea of Levinas, that is, suffering as something which resists being given a meaning and remains incomprehensible. At the same time, elusive does mean trivial or irrational but, like suffering in Levinas, something extremely important that cannot be defined or even properly comprehended.

I have highlighted the immeasurable and elusive nature of meaningless suffering because these two clusters of characterizations manifest a certain parallel to philosophical discussions on gift exchange. In the following, I will first make a comparison between these discussions and Pihlström’s antitheodicy. After that, I will construct a philosophical concept of “burden” which can elucidate some aspects of suffering and antitheodicy in a new manner. Let me add immediately that the following is my own development of the ideas offered by Pihlström.

Immeasurable and Elusive Gifts

Since the classical discussions of Aristotle and Seneca, Western thinkers typically consider that some items of interhuman exchange have a quantitative value or measure, whereas others do not. Payments and other items of calculative exchange have such value, but gifts are often considered to be priceless. Seneca (*De beneficiis* 1, 2) teaches that the recipient of gifts or benefits should show some gratitude, but he or she should not feel to be in debt. Gifts do not have a price tag attached, and this is what qualifies them as gifts. While some thinkers consider that gifts are nevertheless masked payments, the majority view in Western tradition teaches that there is a categorical difference between gifts and payments in this regard. (Saarinen 2005).

In his *Eudemian Ethics* (7, 10), Aristotle teaches that money and knowledge cannot be compared with the same measure. As Marcel Hénaff (2010) has shown in detail, this sentence has been interpreted in the Western thought as meaning that knowledge and truth belong to the same categorical realm as the gift. In some important sense, truth and knowledge have no price and they cannot be sold. The realm of gifts thus contains many different realities which cannot be measured in universally quantitative terms. In addition to truth and knowledge, respect and recognition are often considered to be gift-like in this sense (Saarinen 2016). I do not respect you because you pay me for that. I can only respect you when prices are not relevant in this act.

Some instances of suffering can be understood in terms of prices. My daily labor and my physical training are connected with some suffering but also with some health benefits and monetary compensation. They therefore belong to the realm of economic exchange. However, meaningless suffering makes the claim that we cannot understand it in terms of costs and benefits. The immeasurable nature of such suffering takes place within the realm of non-economy.

Another major discussion in gift exchange concerns the elusive nature of gifts. While this discussion has its classical roots in Seneca, it has been formulated in exemplary fashion by

Jacques Derrida (1995) in his discussion on “pure gift”. Derrida argues that the idea of a pure gift is impossible since this idea deconstructs or destroys itself. When we want to give a completely altruistic or “pure” gift, we find that it is impossible, because there is always some non-altruistic intention involved. The mere thought of my giving something purely altruistically elevates my self-understanding in a manner which is not entirely altruistic.

On the other hand, Derrida does not want to abolish the categorical difference between gifts and payments. The idea of the pure gift remains elusive and incomprehensible, but it is nevertheless an idea which convinces us that there is something beyond economic exchange. However, the pure gift remains semantically elusive. If we want to define it properly, we soon find that it resists being given a fixed meaning.

The elusiveness of meaningless suffering, and maybe suffering in general, resembles the elusiveness of pure gift in Derrida. Insofar as suffering can be explained or justified, it then no longer remains “mere” suffering but becomes like a payment which expects a return or compensation. We can only recognize meaningless suffering adequately when we refrain from explaining and justifying it in economic terms. In this second sense, too, suffering approaches the realm of gifts.

While the acts of justifying and explaining may be finally inadequate with regard to suffering, a certain understanding of it may be possible in spite of elusiveness. The comparison with gift exchange can be regarded as an attempt to understand this phenomenon. The relationship between explanation and understanding is a complex issue; let it suffice to say here that an antitheodist need not sacrifice his capacity to understand suffering, even when she wants to steer clear from the morally problematic attempt to justify it.

Burdens

Still another discussion in gift theory concerns the issue of negative gifts. While gifts are typically depicted as positive additions to their recipients, theorists sometimes ask whether there is an opposite movement that could be characterized as negative gift. Topics like forgiveness and release are sometimes mentioned in this discussion, but in my view they nevertheless remain positive gifts. When a debt is covered, a positive addition to the recipient is given. Neither can debt be called a negative gift, since debts typically belong to realm of measurable payments. (Saarinen 2005, Olivetti 2004).

Let me make a new proposal to the discussion concerning negative gifts. I introduce the concept of “burden”, claiming that it depicts the event of receiving something harmful without deserving it, exchanging it for something else or striving for it. Receiving burdens in this manner resembles the event of receiving gifts. Let me also claim that meaningless suffering is a burden in this sense. While the concept of burden is my own innovation, it receives some conceptual features from the concept of *onus*, “burden”, in the Latin Bible. Typically, illnesses, accidents and other harmful events are called burdens in this sense. As a rule, people have not caused or deserved their own burdens, and they are not intended to be punishments, although a person or a story-teller can sometimes interpret them as such.

Burdens resemble gifts in that they are received without any particular merit or guilt from the recipient. In addition, burdens do not have quantity, that is, they are immeasurable. We may think of illness or separation from the beloved as burdens. They bring forth suffering, but we cannot say how much. The same burden, for instance, separation, may feel significant for one person and insignificant for another. In reality, this separation is immeasurable.

For philosophers like Levinas or Derrida, the concept of burden may sound too externalistic, as the philosophers focus on intentions and agency rather than to the nature of the objects received. My concept of burden nevertheless also assumes a first-person stance which involves intentions and agency. If I aim to make a list of all my personal burdens, I will see how elusive the items of this list are. Some burdens are especially harmful when I am not conscious of them. Other burdens may disappear when I do not think of them. The suffering and burdens of others are even harder to be comprehended adequately than my own burdens, as their intentions and agency are not available to me.

In addition, the concept of “pure burden” is particularly elusive, as many burdens also contain positive sides. However, they cannot be transformed into an evidentialist calculation of harms and benefits. At the same time, my burdens are not mere objects but clusters constructed with the help of my evaluations of them.

Since we experience burdens as suffering, we easily aim at inventing psychological justifications for them. Maybe this illness is a punishment, or maybe it educates me. Maybe the separation from the beloved was my own fault. In reality, however, there need not be any justification or explanation. The burdens received are as incomprehensible and elusive as the positive gifts discussed by Derrida. When we aim at justifying and explaining them, they are inadequately transformed into debts and payments, ceasing to belong to the realm of gifts. Therefore, the burden as burden remains immeasurable and incomprehensible.

The immeasurable and elusive nature of suffering in terms of burden connects it with Pihlström’s antitheodicy. We bear the burden of suffering, and the attempts to justify, measure and comprehend it only alienate us from its fundamental reality. The illness and the separation was nobody’s fault, it just happened and is now there as burden. There are many clever explanations and justifications for what happened, but in reality they are all inadequate and downright false. The burdens are immeasurable and elusive. They are not particularly big or small, they escape our explanatory attempts and demand openness.

In this manner I interpret Pihlström’s antitheodicy, or his view of meaningless suffering, in terms of a negative gift, that is, burden. In this interpretation, Hénaff’s and Derrida’s views of positive gift exchange are transformed to cover also negative gifts, that is, burdens and meaningless suffering. This interpretation shows how and why our burdens remain immeasurable and elusive. In this manner, the interpretation is also concerned with the “transcendental” conditions of possibility. We cannot comprehend burdens, as they remain immeasurable and elusive. If we define them in more detail, they can no longer be adequately recognized.

This is not the only way to interpret Pihlström’s antitheodicy. My interpretation connects it with some classical issues of gift exchange. I remain sympathetic to Pihlström’s claim that we can only recognize adequately other people’s suffering when we do not aim at justifying it or explaining it away. This means a certain seriousness, an attitude which Pihlström often highlights as an ideal of philosophical and academic life.

Seriousness and Levity

My more distant aim is to consider how the category of burden works when we think about suffering. I share the view of Ingolf Dalferth (2015) that illnesses and suffering are *malum*, evil in the broad sense. On the other hand, moral goodness, virtues, merit, guilt, evil, justice and punishments primarily belong to such realm of calculations which does not manifest gift

exchange. Perhaps meaningful and measureable suffering also belongs to calculable exchange.

Meaningless suffering, however, manifests a gift-like burden. Failures of theodicy reveal important features of such burden. Due to its *immeasurable* character, a burden cannot be an object of calculative justice or evidentialist theodicy. While attempts of such theodicy assume suffering which is compatible with economic exchange, the deeper nature of suffering as burden is not economic or calculative.

Due to its *elusive* character, meaningless suffering manifests the limits of human rationality. While theodicies typically assume a universal rationality which can be employed by human beings, antitheodicies often operate within a Kantian transcendental framework which does not give access to rationalities beyond the specific human perspective and horizon (Pihlström & Kivistö 2016). If meaningless suffering is a phenomenon which transcends human rationality, then it remains elusive.

In sum, burdens are negative gifts. Burdens exceed our capacity to measure and define, revealing the limits of human understanding when confronted with meaningless suffering. In addition to Pihlström's Kantian interests, this result bears some affinity to Jean-Luc Marion's (1998) philosophy of gift and donation. The phenomenology of burdens underlines the seriousness with which we need to approach human suffering.

However, there may be a particular angle from which one can have a "lighter" look at the existing burdens. In the classical theory of Seneca, the recipient of the benefit should not think that he is indebted. Receiving a gift, instead of a credit, means that there is no debt. Analogically, one could think that the one carrying a burden should not think that others owe him something. The burden is received, but it does not imply victimization.

Other people have a duty to recognize adequately the one who carries a burden. The carrier should not, however, feel that she performs some achievement for a greater cause. You cannot and should not justify your accidental burdens. Instead, it may be psychologically sound to say that your burden is light (cf. Matthew 11:30). Obviously, saying this may sometimes be ironic or an exaggeration. Silence may then be the best option. Such duties and attitudes manifest the complex balances of gift exchange and antitheodicy.

Another complication concerns the similarities and even overlappings between gifts and burdens. In everyday life, you receive many things of which you cannot say whether they are gifts or burdens. Continuing my workplace routines may be a gift, but it may also be a burden. The separation from my beloved may be a burden, but it may also give me new opportunities. If gifts and burdens resemble one another in the phenomenal world, who can define which is which?

Generally speaking, I do not advocate a Stoic attitude to the changes which occupy us in everyday life. While gifts and burdens remain elusive, my first-person attention to them can normally provide an understanding that can distinguish between gifts and burdens, admitting that the two are sometimes mixed. My lighter look only aims at gazing into the abyss in such manner that the abyss cannot stare back.

While I admire Pihlström's seriousness, my interpretation of antitheodicy in terms of gifts and burdens may slightly increase the amount of optimism and light-mindedness that a sympathizer of antitheodicy is allowed to display. When all parties recognize suffering and at the same also take distance from victimization, both the carrier of burdens and those around him can more easily look beyond adversities. The insight that a sincere experience of meaningless suffering involves immeasurability and elusiveness effectively debunks theodicism

attempts of rationalization. At the same time, this insight enables a certain ethical openness with regard to various undeserved gifts and burdens.

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